



Research Plan

Reconfiguring Embodied Culture

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Turning waste into gift is a common practice for the people at Blikfabriek. The former can factory on the site of this year's Urban Architecture Graduation Studio 'Low Town Down Town' is a place for collection, curation and reconfiguration. Situated in the periphery of a periphery Blikfabriek is a protected stage. It encapsulates a dense concentration of curiosity, craftsmanship and tools in an unsaturated complex of spaces. There's room for waste materials, waiting for their transformation into gifts.¹

The contrast when moving from Blikfabriek into the centre of Antwerp is striking. An oversaturated area where new developments are made out of freshly fabricated materials with little locality. Discarding waste materials to the periphery - like Calvino formulated playfully in his *Invisible Cities* - is part of reality in Antwerp.²



Image 1, a protected stage in Blikfabriek. Source: author

The initial interest, embodied culture and the reconstruction of stories

The collection, curation and reconfiguration of waste materials is what fascinates me. Not just to sanitize the urban landscape and offer an alternative for excavation and polluting production cycles, but moreover because of the cultural value these materials convey. Beyond embodied energy, waste materials carry embodied history. This can be information about the places they're from, the role they fulfilled in the previous context, the cultural traditions and craftsmanship they stand for and the ideology behind their architectural implementation. To go short, information about their embodied culture.

Reconfiguring materials, and therefore reconstructing their stories, is a powerful act. The role of the curator should not be underestimated. We build exhibitions, write travelogues or make photos. In all instances we select what's telling and leave out meaning that's either subordinate or that we never made sense of, that never reached the curator. 'Which stories to (re)construct?' and 'How to construct these stories?' are two key questions to constantly have in mind.

Dissecting the research question

Research question

"Through which narratives could the embodied culture of harvested waste materials from the urban landscape be preserved and expressed?"

The question consists of different parts which will now be dissected.

1. Students, tutors and guest tutors during P1 exhibition 'At the edge, in the centre: Assembling Antwerp' on October 25, 2024
2. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974).

...harvested waste materials from the urban landscape...

This part of the research question resonates primarily with collecting materials. In this collection an initial curation takes place.

Sub-questions

What's the effect of harvesting on the urban landscape?

Do harvested waste materials from the urban landscape offer sufficient input to make valuable output?

What happens when materials are dismantled from their initial composition? Do they degrade heavily?

How to curate what to take?

Current actor

Bruno Vermeersch is a Belgian architect that studied in Gent and lives in Rijswijk. For his small scale projects, all he uses is waste material he harvests himself and collects in his 80 m² shed. To find these waste materials he's dependent on his network of demolition workers and, moreover, his own constant alertness while travelling through the city.³

...narratives...

As part of my research question this term reflects the curation and reconfiguration of materials and how this leads to the reconstruction of stories.

Sub-questions

What transformations did the waste material undergo through the construction of the narrative?

What added value comes with the translation into the narrative?

Who's the righteous narrator?

Current actor

Ultimology is the study of that which is dead or dying. It considers the dead or dying as an entry point for transformative encounter in architecture, but also in other fields like ecology and politics. By using artistic methodologies leading to exploratory and playful projects, Ultimology openly grapples with complex issues.⁴

...embodied culture...

Waste materials convey embodied culture. They contain cultural narratives and transfer knowledge and techniques of building culture and craftsmanship. Apart from this integral human agency, other agents are entangled in the embodied culture of waste materials.

Sub-questions

How do waste materials convey embodied culture?

How to decide on what aspects of embodied culture I should focus?

Which agents are present in materials' embodied culture?

Current actor

A current research closely related to my interest in embodied culture is carried out by the scientific research network READ.ADAPT.REUSE, coordinated by Stephanie Van de Voorde. The working group aims to 'develop new methods to identify, interpret, and preserve 'embodied culture''.⁵ In a confidential document of one of their brainstorm sessions I read about their rich understanding of the term embodied culture. Many of the sub-topics mentioned in the document resonate heavily with my personal interest.

3. Conversation with Bruno Vermeersch on September 26, 2024

4. "Present," Department of Ultimology, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.departmentofultimology.com/present>

5. Scientific research network READ.ADAPT.REUSE, minutes of 'Brainstorm session on 'EMBODIED CULTURE''

Methodology

My methodology consists of conducting in-depth interviews with current actors, studying completed literature and art projects, doing fieldwork and constructing stories.

In-depth interviews

I'd like to enrich my research by talking to some of the current actors I just mentioned. Their practices on different scales, from highly academic and artistic to hands on and functional, will build a profound understanding of my research topic.

Fiona Hallinan

For the screening of the film 'Making Dust' at AFFR I was in contact with Fiona Hallinan, co-founder of the Department of Ultimology. She's currently working on her Phd at KU Leuven which puts special focus on the phenomenon of mourning.⁶ Although Ultimology's exact take on embodied culture is not yet clear to me, its narratives could inform and inspire my research.

Stephanie Van de Voorde

As a work in progress the study of the scientific research network READ.ADAPT.REUSE, coordinated by Stephanie Van de Voorde, offers a rich soil for my research. The challenge for me seems to filter and select suitable references. Or could my research in any way contribute to their current endeavours?

Literature and art projects

Studying literature and art projects helps me to get an understanding of the discourse that has already taken place. This includes important ideologies like the As Found movement⁷ and different takes on embodied culture, as in the book *Reciprocal Landscapes* by Jane Hutton⁸ and the project *Ethics of Dust* by Otero-Pailos Studio⁹.

Fieldwork

The goal of doing fieldwork for my research is to move beyond the theoretical, get inspired by references and stay close to the site.

Bruno Vermeersch

While speaking with Bruno about my research topic, he suggested I could join him on his reuse endeavours. This is a good way to learn more about the quality and potential of materials and the procedural waste cycle Bruno is dependent on.

Eco cathedral, Louis le Roy

On day one of the studio I was gifted the brick. The eco cathedral may offer new insights on the qualities of building with 'waste' and building along with nature.

Flee market installations at the site

How could waste materials involve agents in the site and its metabolism? While diving into my research topic I want to stay connected to the site of Blikfabriek and surroundings. I'm in the P2 masterplan group with Marianna Angelini and Lance Schroten. Our personal research topics are not identical, but entangled in many ways. Our plan to build flee market installations in and around the site is a way to become actors ourselves and experiment with reconfigurations of waste materials in Blikfabriek.

6. Conversation with Fiona Hallinan on October 10, 2024

7. Claude Lichtenstein and Thomas Schreggenberger, *As Found, The Discovery of the Ordinary* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2001).

8. Jane Hutton, *Reciprocal Landscapes: Stories of Material Movements* (Routledge, 2020).

9. Jorge Otero-Pailos, *The Ethics of Dust* (Commissioned and produced by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, 2009).

Constructing stories

In order to let research and design dance together, I'd like to include story construction in the methodology. Apart from the flea market installations an example is the mini exhibition I made while processing the photos taken during the first excursion to Blikfabriek.¹⁰ Following the intuitive flow of building a story with the input of the analogue photo series helped me to substantiate and communicate my findings.

Since language is key in constructing stories the production of a lexicon, defining frequently used terms in the project, could be an informative act.¹¹



Image 4, a scaled mini exhibition in the expo hall of Blikfabriek. Source: author

Annotated bibliography

Hutton, Jane. *Reciprocal Landscapes: Stories of Material Movements*. Routledge, 2020.

This book explores the tangible and intangible connections between different sites in New York City and the landscapes excavated for its production. It also treats resonating projects like the artist Robert Smithson's Non-sites, about the dialectic relation between industrial landscapes and the reconfigured sculptures he produced.

Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. Translated by William Weaver. Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974.

Through the style of magical realism this book sparks joy. Calvino's somewhat intuitive flow of thinking outside the realms of the real leads to new ways of approaching urban ecologies.

Lichtenstein, Claude, and Schregenerberger, Thomas. *As Found, The Discovery of the Ordinary*. Lars Müller Publishers, 2001.

A book about, among others, the Independent Group with members like Robert Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Alison and Peter Smithson. I'd like to find out more about the principles of this group, and the overarching ideology of *As Found*, as a possible methodology for my project.

Otero-Pailos, Jorge. *The Ethics of Dust*. Commissioned and produced by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary for the 53rd International Art Exhibition / Biennale di Venezia, 2009.

This project translates the cleaning of monuments into an exhibition of the facade's substracted patina, consisting of dust. Further exploration of the project and the ideas of the author Jorge Otero-Pailos informs me about the bearers of embodied culture.

10. see 'Appendix 1, mini exhibition'.

11. see 'Appendix 2, a lexicon for MSc2'